

# Tree planters save lives

Planting prepared Ivan Gayton for humanitarian work

BY JOHN THOMSON

His first posting was in Burundi in the rebel-contested town of Kinyinya. It was 2003 and Ivan Gayton had just started his new job as a logistician with Medecins Sans Frontieres, responsible for the vehicles, communications and the construction and upkeep of the village hospital. Stressful? Yes. Dangerous? Undoubtedly. But no big deal, says Gayton, because as a former tree planter he knew how to cope with adverse conditions and not freak out about it. "Tree planters don't wig out," he says. Gayton is one of many tree planters - he personally

knows of thirty - who have made the jump from tree planting to working with MSF, from saving the environment to saving lives. It may sound like a stretch but Gayton swears it's a valid connection.

"I started tree planting as an 18 year old," he says of his early years in BC and Alberta. "We'll save the world, plant trees, create oxygen and all that good stuff. I wanted, and still want, my adventure with a side order of meaning."

Tree planting fit the bill. Travel, an opportunity to meet new people and make a contribution. "A lot of the people who plant trees have a sense of doing the right thing," he continues. "There's a certain amount of purpose to it."

He was handed a planting bag, a shovel and responsibility. "My first season, the boss came to me and said 'do you have a driver's license?' and I said Yes. He literally tossed me the keys. I went from tree

planter to the guy in charge of the truck and then the straw boss to officially the crew boss and eventually a supervisor."

Gayton spent 12 years in the field, working in Alberta, Yukon, northern BC and all over Vancouver Island. Focussed and disciplined, he found he was good at dealing with whatever challenges came his way. He remembers being caught in heavy weather in the Hecate Straight in a 14 foot aluminum boat and wondering if he'd ever make it out alive. He did. He remembers bears in the cook shack and workers collapsing on the block hours from the nearest civilization.

"It turned out that most of the skill set that I was using to operate remote forest camps in BC and Alberta were almost identical to the skill set used to support medical programs in refugee camps in some of the worst places in the world."

In 2003, he offered his services to Medecins Sans Frontieres, a natural progression for a man who says "abstract principles are and always have been a big part of what motivates

me."

"They gave me a test. There was a test in electrics and generators. There was a test on vehicles. There was a test on computer use. Have you dealt with diesel generators on bad roads? they asked. Well, yeah. Have you dealt with tents? Yeah. Have you dealt with cold chain (keeping certain vaccines and medicines cool before use)? My goodness, I've dealt with millions and millions of seedlings that have to be kept cold before they get injected. Have you dealt with remote circumstances where, if you forget something, you just don't have it? Yeah. Have you dealt with radios in a remote location? Uh huh. There were five or six different sections and according to the woman in the office I was the first person to pass all the sections in the Vancouver office. And I said 'well that's obvious because tree planters are great improvisers."

Take risk assessment, for instance. Gayton says risk assessment is the same in Africa than it is in the Canadian bush. "Look ahead to predict possible hazards. If possible adapt your work to avoid them and where necessary take precautions to reduce the possible consequences."

Gayton says while the technical similarities between tree planting and logistical work made him an attractive prospect, it was his mental resilience that sealed the deal.

"I can't think of any other kind of work where you're under so much mental strain and you're so isolated," he says. "But tree planters don't quit."

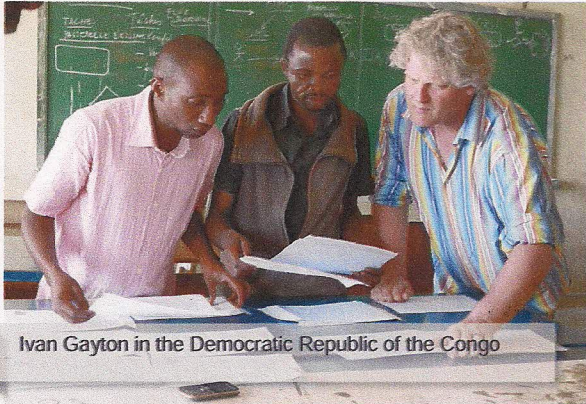
Gayton has been with Medecins Sans Frontieres since 2003, travelling the world and assuming more and more responsibility, first as a logistician, then as a project coordinator and then as head of mission. He's presently working in the London, England office as a technical innovation advisor, refining a mapping program he created while dealing with cholera in Haiti.

"I was shocked about how little we knew about the epidemiological curve," he says. So he called the Google Earth people and together "we developed a utility to map the cholera cases in real time." Innovation born of necessity - the tree planters' creed.

"I'm one of a steady stream. There's a whole mafia of Canadian tree planters," he says of principled workers with similar backgrounds and yes, he hires his former peers.

"In fact, whenever interviewing someone, if they had more than a single season of tree planting experience I would put them at the top of the list simply because I could be confident that they had been in tough conditions before. We're looking for people with the mental stamina to survive the environment and the work."

Tree planters, says Gayton, are up to the task. ♦



Ivan Gayton in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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